

# George Washington Birthplace National Monument

## Natural Resources – Poison Ivy



Poison ivy

Image courtesy of A.D.A.M.

Poison Ivy, or *Toxicodendron radicans*, is a native plant to Virginia, and can be readily found at George Washington Birthplace National Monument throughout the year. It is found in many growing forms such as small shrubs, ground cover, and even as large, hairy looking vines along the trunks of trees. The leaves of this plant tend to be glossy in appearance, and can be green, red, or even yellow depending on the time of year. The leaflets, as the one shown left, tend to have three leaves and grow alternatively along the vine or stem. A number of sayings come from the three leaf configuration such as “leaves of three, beware of me.”



Images of leaves and berries courtesy of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.



Hairy-looking vines. (Melissa MB Wilkins)

The oil known as *urushiol*, is where many people get their dread of Poison Ivy. When skin comes in contact with **ANY** part of the plant, this oil can be released and will bind with the skin in minutes. A substantial amount of the population will experience an allergic reaction to this binding. Most of the symptoms will become apparent within a couple of hours after exposure, but for some people it may take a few days. Areas of itchy skin are common and are often associated with redness and even some blistering. Like many allergies, it may affect some people less or greater than others. Serious reactions can include swelling and large blisters. Medical attention may be needed once a reaction begins.

So the important step is to completely avoid Poison Ivy when possible. There are also many types of pre-contact solutions you can purchase if you know you will be in an area with this poisonous plant. Long sleeve shirts and long pants can also help as long as you remember that the oil may get on your clothing. If you must work in and around Poison Ivy, wear gloves and wash your hands and clothing with soap as soon as possible. **Never burn Poison Ivy.** If burned, the oil becomes a vapor which can be inhaled and irritate your lungs.

Would it be better just to get rid of the plant?

Remember, Poison Ivy, while sometimes is an inconvenience to humans, is part of the native natural resources of our park. Birds eat the small whitish berries, bees enjoy its blooming spring flowers, and many other animals use these plants for both food and shelter. So we hope you enjoy seeing these natural wonders, but use caution and view from a distance.